

# ‘Men in skirts’ disrobed: narrative history and source criticism

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Michael Scott’s article ‘Men in skirts’ tells a gripping story of events at a key moment in Greek history. But how does he know what happened? ‘Narrative history’, for all its attractions, always raises questions about the methods underlying the story. In particular, we need to think about the sources being used: who is telling us what, and for what reasons?

## Narrative history and source criticism

‘Men in skirts’ is a fine example of what many call ‘narrative history’: it presents an account of an episode of the ancient world in the form of a story. Ancient historians often oppose this style to a ‘source-critical’ approach, which involves analysing and interrogating the various sources that we can use to reconstruct aspects of ancient life. Fiona Hobden’s article in this issue, for example, takes apart Lysias’ speech *On the Murder of Eratosthenes*, showing that we can’t take it at face value. Adam Lomax, similarly, cautions us against taking Thucydides’ and Aristophanes’ criticisms of Cleon too literally. In the last *Omnibus*, Simon James explored the archaeological evidence that may be able to help us reconstruct what happened at a siege in Roman Syria. What is different about these articles is that they explore not just *what* happened but the *reasons why we might be led to think* that certain things happened.

This distinction between source-critical and narrative history can already be seen in antiquity. Herodotus, for one, often talks about the problems raised when his sources conflict. Here is an example from book one, where he is describing how Croesus crossed the river Halys:

*When Croesus reached the Halys he next used existing bridges to get his army across. At least, that is what I think, but the usual account of the Greeks is that Thales of Miletus got the army across ... [he then describes the ‘story’ that Thales diverted the river from its original course] ... There are those who go so far as to claim that the original*

*river bed completely dried up, but I find this implausible, because if it were true, how would they have crossed the river on the way back?*

Herodotus challenges his ‘source’ – the received account of the crossing of the river – on the grounds of implausibility, applying his own knowledge of physical geography. This method is not all that different from the kind of techniques used by Fiona Hobden, who brings her knowledge of Athenian law to bear on Lysias, showing how implausible his account is. The forensic metaphor in Hobden’s piece (she writes of ‘cross-examining’ Lysias, turning the tables on the law-court orator) is not accidental: this sense that we shouldn’t trust one person’s version of events probably does derive ultimately from legal contexts. Herodotus himself, like so many writers of his day, was heavily influenced by new ideas about truth and plausibility that came from the courts. It is not surprising that we find, in a world in which one of the duties of a citizen is to test the reliability of his peers’ stories, a critical approach to conflicting stories about the past too.

Many ancient historians, however, also use narrative. Thucydides can be source-critical – for example, when in book one he dismisses the Homeric account of the Trojan War as exaggerated and idealized – but often writes as though his account of events were an unproblematic record of reality. This realistic effect is compounded by his chronological organization of his material, so that as we read through we get the impression that we are reliving things as they happened. Even Herodotus has large stretches of narrative history. With ancient writers, it is often a case less of

‘either/or’ than of ‘both/and’.

## Disrobing the men in skirts

Modern historians, by contrast, tend to take stronger positions on the issue. Narrative history is often thought of as suspicious, because it conceals the thought processes behind it. Reading Scott’s account of the events of 379 B.C., you will get the impression that we know an extraordinary amount of detail about the Theban rebellion. But how does he know all of this? we might want to ask. What are his sources?

Do we, perhaps, have a rare instance of an eye-witness account by one of the participants? Do we have commemorative inscriptions, coins, or statues? Sadly, but predictably, the answer is ‘no’. The event is treated briefly by Xenophon, Nepos, and Diodorus of Sicily, but for the detailed texture we rely on one single source. It is, to be sure, an exceptionally interesting source, written by a dedicated historian and intellectual – but it is in no sense a straightforward window onto the world of 379.

Plutarch of Chaeroneia (in Boeotia) was born at some point in the middle of the first century A.D., and died perhaps in around 120. He was an extraordinarily influential figure, with one foot in two camps. He was one of the leading lights of the Greek intellectual tradition, a philosopher, biographer and essayist; but also an excellent networker with the Roman ruling classes of the day (Greece was now a province of the Roman Empire), a Latin speaker, and indeed a Roman citizen. This bifocal identity can be seen in his most famous work, the *Parallel Lives*, which pairs biographies of famous Greeks and Romans (hence ‘parallel’).

The account of the Theban revolution comes in his essay *On Socrates’ personal deity*. That title itself will probably surprise you: what is an account of an event of Theban history in 379 B.C. doing in a discussion of an Athenian philosopher who died twenty years earlier? In fact, the Theban rebellion is used as the frame story

for a philosophical discussion, between participants, of Socrates' habit of claiming divine inspiration from a 'little demon' (*daimonion*). The narrative structure is actually even more complex than that. The essay opens with two men, Caphisias and Archedamus, reminiscing later in Athens about the Theban events: the Theban rebellion is recounted retrospectively.

So we need to be careful before assuming that Plutarch's primary aim is to give us historical realism. It is not. In fact, this technique of embedding philosophy within narrative frames is designed to recall Plato, one of Plutarch's intellectual heroes: in this case, the 'nested' narrative frames are particularly designed to recall the great philosopher's *Phaedo*, which retrospectively tells the story of the death of Socrates. The use of vivid, detailed narrative is supposed to make us think of philosophical drama, not accurate history.

### Story-telling with a purpose

Why did Plutarch choose the Theban revolution as the setting for his philosophical discussion of divine inspiration? For a number of reasons. For a start, it is soon enough after the death of Socrates to allow the participants in the dialogue to be able to remember the great teacher. Secondly, the themes of the Theban rebellion may have had particular resonance in the world in which he lived. Plutarch was no insurrectionist, but his various historical accounts do come back, time and again, to themes of foreign domination and local resistance: these were undoubtedly ideas that were floating in the air at this time when Greece was a province of the Roman empire.

But the last explanation is probably the most important. Plutarch was a proud Boeotian. Boeotia had a reputation as a hillbilly backwater, a reputation that he never tired of struggling against. His work *On the malice of Herodotus*, for example, is designed to combat the anti-Boeotian strain (that he perceived) in the great historian. Near the beginning of *On Socrates' personal deity*, Caphisias speaks of 'the slur which used to be brought against the Boeotians – of being averse to discussions – but is now fading, since Simmias and Cebes have demonstrated their enthusiasm in the presence of your Socrates'. Simmias and Cebes are two Theban participants in the discussion of Plato's *Phaedo*. Plutarch is aiming, through one of the characters in his dialogue, to rescue the reputation of his native region by highlighting the fact that Socrates' circle included Boeotians. This gives us a clear pointer towards the reasons for the Theban context for the dialogue as a whole: Plutarch is showing not only that Boeotians too do philosophy, but also that they can boast great moments

in history.

The main source for the Theban rebellion, then, was written some 500 years after the event, by a highly sophisticated, cunning author, who had his own personal agenda to pursue. Read and savour his thrilling account, whether in the original (available in the Penguin edition of Plutarch's essays) or in Michael Scott's artful re-telling. But never confuse narrative history with reality! All story-tellers have their hidden motivations.

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